

# *Within and Beyond the Writing Process in the Secondary English Classroom*

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# 4

## *Grammar, Correctness, and Style*

No topic in writing instruction garners more public debate, more educational research, or more headaches for writing teachers than grammar and correctness and the role they play in the writing process. No topic reported on in the scholarship of writing instruction is ignored more than this one. And no topic strikes terror in the heart of young writers more than this. The intensity of the emotions surrounding the topic of grammar and correctness is, in large part, attributed to the myths and misconceptions embedded in these issues. Grammar and correctness issues are often inflamed by intuition rather than by reason, by misunderstandings rather than by knowledge based in research. As part of the introduction to this chapter that focuses on writing issues related to correctness of language and effectiveness of style, we want to explore these common myths and provide an overview of the research on the relationship between direct grammar instruction and the development of writing. This theoretical framework can then be used to discuss when and how teachers can deal with the correctness issue in more rational and practical ways. The chapter will then move to the more practical issues of what to do about grammar, correctness, and usage in the classroom, including non-mainstream dialects. The concluding sections will focus on sentence combining and other stylistic issues at the sentence level.

The following NCATE/NCTE standards are addressed in this chapter.

- 2.1** Demonstrate respect for the worth and contributions of all learners;
- 3.1.1** Demonstrate understanding of language acquisition and development;
- 3.1.2** Demonstrate how reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking are interrelated throughout all aspects of the English language arts curriculum and draw upon both theory and practice in doing so;
- 3.1.3** Demonstrate that they understand the impact of cultural, economic, political, and social environments upon language and can convey that understanding to students by drawing upon both theory and practice;
- 3.1.4** Demonstrate a respect for and a deep understanding of diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic

regions, and social roles and show consistent attention to accommodating such diversity;

- 3.1.6 Demonstrate a knowledge of English grammars and use that knowledge in teaching both oral and written forms of the language;
- 3.2.5 Demonstrate knowledge of language structure and conventions in creating and critiquing print and non-print texts of their own and their students;
- 3.7.1 Use major sources of research theory related to English language arts consistently to support their teaching decisions;
- 4.5 Create and sustain learning environments which promote respect for and support of individual differences of ethnicity, race, language, culture, gender, and ability.

As we suggest later in this chapter, pendulum swings in the formal teaching of grammar have been occurring over this past half century. Not all teachers entering the new millennium are assuming that formal grammar instruction is necessary; in fact, as we suggest later, many have given up the study of grammar altogether. Nevertheless in many schools and classrooms, grammar instruction remains a major area of study within the English curriculum. Weaver (1996, 7-9) suggests that the systematic teaching of grammar persists in those classrooms for a number of reasons: 1) unfamiliarity with the research or a refusal to believe the research; 2) the claims made by some of the good writers in their classes that their writing ability is a result of direct grammar instruction; 3) the belief that direct, systematic instruction is necessary in order to apply the principles to writing; 4) the belief that the study of grammar is good mental discipline; 5) or the belief that national standardized tests mandate overt knowledge of grammar. Complicating teachers' attitudes toward the teaching of grammar is the widespread public perception about the importance of systematic grammar instruction. Politicians, parents, and the public in general see systematic grammar instruction as the way to self-discipline and the way to writing effectiveness, particularly if they feel that their own writing ability corresponds to their experiences of studying grammar in school. Even teachers who question the efficacy of its instruction get caught up in the political impact of these arguments. The following comments by teachers indicate the knotty issue grammar instruction has become:

"I don't understand why good students leave out possessives when I've taught it, reinforced it, quizzed it. . . . Yet even after all this, there are those errors in the title, in the very first sentence!"

"Do I read a paper and ignore all punctuation? What good is that for them?"

"I put 5X on their papers and they have to write it over five times. It's so stupid, obviously. But I can't reinforce this by doing nothing" (Rosen 1987, 139).

## ***Grammars Defined***

Before we can consider issues related to grammar instruction in any detail, it is important to specify what we mean by the term "grammar." On the one hand, linguists use the term to refer to the linguistic knowledge that speakers of a language

operate with, for the most part unconsciously—the internalized system of rules by which we operate in our production and comprehension of language (Grammar I). For example, all speakers operate with a rule that allows a verb particle to shift to the end of a sentence: “She turned down the offer” or “She turned the offer down.” Speakers can choose either option: “turned down the offer” or “turned the offer down.” But speakers feel obligated to make the shift when a pronoun replaces the direct object “offer”: “She turned it down” rather than “she turned down it.” Speakers know this rule unconsciously and operate with it consistently: when it’s a noun phrase, the shift is optional; when it’s a pronoun, the shift is obligatory.

On the other hand, grammar is sometimes defined as the descriptions of those rules that linguists have constructed from observing the language in use (Grammar II). When we say, therefore, that speakers of a language operate with a grammar of that language, we are referring to Grammar I; when we talk about a description of those rules as they are outlined in a traditional grammar book or a transformational grammar text, such as how adverbials or verb tenses operate in English, we are referring to Grammar II, which merely reflects the internalized knowledge (Grammar I) of speakers. Grammar II is always descriptive rather than prescriptive; it describes how speakers actually use language rather than how someone thinks they *should* use language. Descriptive grammars, therefore, are non-judgmental. They theoretically acknowledge variation from dialect to dialect, simply recording how speakers operate with the rules within their dialect system. A description of the rules of one dialect would reflect a different system for negation, past tense formation, and verb forms from the system used in a neighboring dialect, much like the grammatically different structures in Spanish and English for noun modification, where in the former the adjective follows the noun and in the latter it precedes the noun. For example, one dialect may have a rule allowing for double negation, as evidenced in the usage found in many English vernaculars such as “He didn’t do nothing to earn it.” A neighboring dialect, on the other hand, might operate with a rule that disallowed most double negatives: “He didn’t do anything to earn it.”

Grammar III is the study of usage—the table manners of language—that focus on “correctness” of usage, that prescribe some features and proscribe others: “Plural subjects take plural verbs” and “You should never end a sentence with a preposition.” Usage texts, therefore, violate the linguistic definition of Grammar II by their assumption that what is worthy of description is only the rule system operating in some kind of ideal language or dialect—Standard English, for want of a better term. What usage texts consider to be “correct” usage primarily reflects the language patterns of some idealized version of “Standard English” and the non-stigmatized usages of dialect patterns of middle-class speech, even though few speakers of any dialect operate with all the usage rules of “Standard English” consistently. What is considered “correct” usage has evolved over time from historical precedents regarding usage, usually based on the linguistic forms most commonly used by the speech communities with the greatest economic and political power. Considering something as “incorrect,” therefore, is a matter of social convention rather than an inherent “flaw” in the linguistic structure itself.

"Correct" usage often changes over time because of shifts in attitude towards various usages. In fact, "hissself" was a perfectly respectable usage in the eighteenth century that eventually fell into disfavor; multiple negation was a regular feature of Middle English speech until the eighteenth century, when the age of rationalism suggested that linguistic features should be symmetrical and logical, for example, and that two negatives make a positive. Double comparatives were considered just fine until the eighteenth century when "more gladder" was rejected in favor of "gladder" or "more glad." The imposition of prescriptive rules for language use in the eighteenth century coincided with the growth of a middle class eager to change their dialects to reflect a new gentility (Thomas and Tchudi 1999) and to use language rules as a means of identifying those who "belonged" to the middle class. The fascination with Latin as the "ideal" language encouraged usage rules such as never ending sentences with a preposition, never splitting infinitives, etc. Never mind that the radically different way verbs operated in Latin prevented infinitives from being "split," unlike English, whose verb system easily accommodated it. "Rules is rules," Latin predominated as the model language, and the "middle class" cheerfully adhered to the rules as a way of maintaining their position, prestige, and power, on the one hand, and as a way of making middle-class membership inaccessible to those whose language didn't match up, on the other.

In short, when we speak about "grammar" we need to clarify which of the definitions we're using, and we will regularly refer to Grammar I, II, and III as a means of identifying the definition to avoid confusion. Much of what goes on in English classrooms related to grammar study is a combination of Grammars II and III—some focus on descriptions of syntactic elements such as kinds of phrases, clauses, verbs, and parts of speech, and some focus on prescriptive usage rules that attempt to get speakers and writers to avoid stigmatized forms of English usage.

Reviews of studies based on the teaching of Grammar II, traditional descriptions of grammar (H. A. Greene; DeBoer; Searles and Carlson; Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer), uniformly report not only the lack of positive effect on writing ability but the potential for negative effects if time spent on writing is taken up by the formal study of grammar. And despite the fact that newer methods of linguistic analysis, such as functional grammar and transformational grammar, held some hope that their formal study would yield more positive results, these approaches, too, have proven to be disappointing. Carryover to student writing from grammatical analysis seems minimal (Elley et al.; McQuade). Sentence combining activities seem to be the one exception. Some evidence exists that writers who participated in sentence combining exercises used more syntactically complex sentences in their own writing. Yet even here, the positive results occurred only when students actually did some writing, not when they merely studied the structure of language (Weaver 1996). Weaver indicates that "there is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a descriptive or explanatory grammar of the language, whether that grammar be traditional, structural, transformational, or any other kind" (23). As Weaver suggests, it's the guided application, not the formal study of grammar, that's important (24). In other words,

marching students through eight-week units or twenty-week school semesters identifying grammatical structures, studying Standard English usage, and doing workbook exercises is not as effective as we'd like to believe. Instead, students need to be immersed in a writing and reading environment in which language study has a direct application to their own composing, where the usage skills they are taught are immediately applied to the papers they are writing, and where the grammatical structures they study help them become responsive readers and flexible writers. Later in this chapter we present suggestions for how teachers can accomplish the guided application of grammar to student writing by incorporating grammar and usage study into a well-planned writing program.

### *The Developmental Nature of Syntactic Complexity*

Before we discuss the principles and practices of guided application to student writing, it is critical for teachers to understand both the developmental nature of writing and the complexity of issues related to what we mean by "error." The development of writing is an on-going process, just as oral language development is, a point discussed in Chapter Two. Being able to articulate the nature of writing development for their own students, for parents, and for the public enables teachers to deal with the notion of error in writing that moves the discussion beyond the polarity of mere correctness versus incorrectness.

Like oral language, children's written syntax becomes increasingly more complex over time, primarily from opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and a willingness to experiment with new forms and structures. Trial and error is a natural part of the process. Studies over the past several years tracing children's syntactic development suggest that all the basic English sentence patterns in oral language are developed by the end of kindergarten, and major kinds of subordinate clauses such as nominals, adjectivals, and adverbials are used frequently by kindergartners, as in the following examples:

- "I want whatever he wants" (nominal clause);
- "Sally is the girl I like the most" (adjectival);
- "If she chases us, let's hide" (adverbial).

Combining simple sentences into more complex ones can also be accomplished by coordinating elements. In their writing children first coordinate entire sentences ("The bunny ran across the front yard, and then he went under the evergreen."), which eventually gives way to coordinating elements within sentences ("The bunny ran across the yard and went under the evergreen.") These two major forms of sentence combining—subordination and coordination—at first result in increasing sentence length, but eventually those sentences become shorter and more efficient as writers reduce clauses to phrases, replace coordination with phrases, and use syntactic patterns that require fewer words. Weaver

cites the work of Hunt as he describes, through example, how young writers become increasingly more efficient—using fewer words but more syntactically complex structures:

In grade four, says Hunt, the following sentences, not very syntactically complex, are typical:

Bauxite contains aluminum and it contains several other substances. Workmen extract these other substances from the bauxite. They grind the bauxite and put it in tanks. Pressure is in the tanks. . . . (qtd. in Weaver 1996, 125)

By eighth grade, writers are more likely to use more complex syntax by conjoining and subordinating ideas:

Bauxite contains several other substances. Workmen extract these from bauxite by grinding it, then putting it in pressure tanks. . . . (qtd. in Weaver 1996, 126)

As Weaver suggests, writers say more, in fewer words.

We should note here that oral language seems to be more syntactically complex than written language until approximately grade seven, when it begins to reverse. By high school, students are capable, for the most part, of using complex coordination and subordination and various kinds of phrases and clauses in their writing, even if they are unable to identify the types or kinds of clauses and phrases used and unlikely to use them in their oral language. What is evident in their writing is that the syntactic complexity moves beyond any descriptions of grammatical constructions they have studied overtly in their English grammar classes. For example, it isn't unusual to find a junior writing something as syntactically complicated as "His attitudes toward the governor, strengthened by the time he spent working in the governor's office, became increasingly negative." Chances are excellent that no grammar book asked for sentence diagramming of such a linguistically complex sentence or even asked students to identify all the clauses and phrases embedded into this one complex sentence.

At the same time, we must understand that the syntactic complexity evident in the writing of high school students is not always well structured, clear, and graceful, so that many writers still have considerable work to do to make their prose polished and articulate.

Although we encourage the use of sentence combining activities (see later discussion in this chapter) for developing fluency in writing, our discussion of developing syntactic complexity and the research on its effectiveness must be tempered with the following caveats. First, some of the work on which these results are based involves out-of-context sentence combining exercises (Hunt), problematic for two reasons. Writing resulting from such exercises may not always reflect the free-writing of children at these ages, and even if sentence combining exercises encourage children to create more syntactically complex sentences as part of those exercises than they might do naturally in their writing, there is not always the carryover from syntactic complexity in out-of-context exercises to their own natural writing. Furthermore, sentence combining exercises out of context are less

valuable than direct guidance in helping writers expand, combine, and reorganize sentence structures within their own writing (Weaver 1996, 81).

The second caveat is that it may be neither desirable nor possible to hasten syntactic growth, which is more often a matter of maturation and writing experience than something that can be induced artificially through writing exercises. Such growth occurs for most writers naturally through continued writing opportunities. Focusing students on complexity at the expense of clarity and sentence variety can lead to inflated, awkward prose. As Weaver suggests, syntactically complex sentences can be

... awkward, convoluted, even unintelligible; they can also be inappropriate to the subject, the audience, and the writer's or persona's voice. Conversely, relatively simple sentences can make their point succinctly and emphatically. Often, of course, sentence variety is best (1996, 130).

And the third caveat is that syntactic complexity varies considerably from one genre to another. Exposition and argumentation often call for greater syntactic complexity than does narration, for example. Assuming that all genres should have similar levels of complexity is to overlook the inherent differences among them. Furthermore, students asked to write in these more complex genres are often stretching their linguistic ability, which may produce errors, as we will discuss below.

### *The Nature of "Error"*

Because so much grading energy traditionally has gone into the "error hunt," looking for "violations" of Grammar III usage rules, we wish to question, and complicate teachers' notions of error within the developmental process of syntactic and linguistic maturity. Not all errors are simple violations of a Grammar III usage rule, as Murdick asserts, despite the fact that traditional textbooks often imply just that—that error is an obvious deviation from a set of rules easy to describe and apply to one's writing. The result is that a set of easily identified mistakes such as agreement, comma splices, dangling modifiers, leads to the mistaken notion that error hunting and error correction are easy goals to achieve. Murdick complicates this notion by citing Krishna's 1975 article in *The Journal of Basic Writing* which points out that the

clear-cut and predictable errors that are most precisely described and categorized in the grammar books . . . dwindle in significance next to problems of incoherence, illogicality, lack of conventional idiom or clear syntax—amorphous and unpredictable errors involving the structure of the whole sentence (qtd. in Murdick, 41).

Murdick's examples of such syntactic difficulty include the following (41):

1. Due to the problems of discipline and general apathy arise largely from the boredom of students who have no interest in academic matters.
2. They suggested to make the course easier.

Neither sentence is easily "correctable" from prescriptions of usage rules found in most grammar books or handbooks. Both sentences suggest the need to look beyond the traditional kinds of errors cited in grammar books and to consider the broader developmental, rhetorical, and usage matters that affect writing fluency, a point we discuss in the next section. Both types of problems in the writing need to be dealt with through teacher-conferencing, working with the student on reshaping the sentence to make it more idiomatic. (See below for a fuller description of how these sentences can be revised.) Graceful, idiomatic, articulate writing comes only with considerable practice, opportunities to write, and guidance by teachers on an individual basis.

Our discussion of error in this chapter deliberately excludes the issues of typos or performance errors that result from momentary lapses in writing: inadvertently reversing two words or deleting a word, etc. Error, from a linguistic and rhetorical perspective, falls into four general categories: 1) developmental errors resulting from experimentation with more complex syntactic structures and vocabulary; 2) rhetorical errors that may simply be inappropriate for the context, voice, and purpose of the writing; 3) dialect or usage features that, when they appear in writing, may be social markers that identify the writer as using features considered to be non-standard; and 4) errors in the use of writing conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, spelling. Particularly the first three categories suggest the need to give up the polarities of correct/incorrect, good/bad, right/wrong views of language. Not all errors are violations of rules, not all errors are categorically bad, and not all errors need to be red-penciled as signs of writing failure. "Good English," we would like to echo from a number of linguists, is appropriate to the writer's purpose, appropriate to the context, and comfortable to the speaker/writer and the listener/reader (Andrews). And we might add, good English is language that is also age-appropriate. Such a definition complicates the simplistic notion of correct and incorrect and has implications for the nature of the "error hunt" in which some teachers participate.

The following section describes each of these kinds of errors and provides examples:

**Developmental Errors.** Developmental errors and inappropriate language for the context, voice, or purpose of writing evolve from attempts of writers to try out new forms, to move beyond familiar ground, to write within new contexts and with a variety of purposes. In Chapter Two we argued that "error" is not categorically negative—that as speakers and writers begin to use more sophisticated syntax and sentence organization, they make errors as they experiment with structure and vocabulary. Because growth in language, both oral and written, is accomplished through a certain amount of trial and error, what may appear to be errors or regressions are often indications of progress. The syntax of young writers may consist primarily of simple sentences, all punctuated correctly, but when writers begin using more complex sentences containing dependent and independent clauses, they may also use sentence fragments for the first time, reflecting the growth of syntactic complexity of their writing. "I hate peanut butter and jelly

sandwiches, but my mom made me eat it anyway" may become, "My mom made me eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Even though I hate them." Similarly, when complex sentences with modifying phrases are first used, writers may have difficulty knowing where to place the phrases. For example, "We flew over Washington at night. The Capitol was all lit up" may become, "Flying over Washington at night, the Capitol was all lit up." When writers first begin to use subordination, they may over-use or over-generalize the appropriateness of this structure, as in the following example: "Soccer coaches sometimes favor certain players, who might not always be the best ones who can get the job done, which really angers other players on the team who want a chance."

Sometimes the less-than-fluent use of language involves idiomatic usage—new vocabulary that takes a specific grammatical structure unfamiliar to the writer, as in the previously cited sentence, "They suggested to make the course easier," in which the writer is unaware of the need to use a gerund following the verb "suggested": "They suggested making the course easier." Similarly, problems with word choice and diction often reflect writers' attempts to use vocabulary that they are not fully comfortable with as they move beyond simple topics and ideas to more complex ones requiring a degree of sophistication not yet achieved, as in: "Euphemism is the desire to use words in an imprecise manner purposefully to create false impressions of precise word meanings."

Occasionally developing writers "back into" their sentences, putting the heart of their idea into prepositional phrases, object noun clauses . . . or other ancillary parts of the sentence, wasting the subject" (Krishna, quoted in Murdick, 41), as in the sentence quoted earlier: "Due to the problems of discipline and general apathy arise largely from the boredom of students who have no interest in academic matters," which can be revised as, "The problems of discipline and general apathy arise. . . ."

While such "errors" may be pointed out to writers as places for revisions, they should be considered by-products of a necessary stage in the development of more sophisticated syntax. Similarly, as writers try out new forms and more complicated sentences, their writing may temporarily develop problems with punctuation and sentence fragments. Perfectly punctuated simple sentences give way to more complex ones that sometimes involve difficulties with punctuation, sentence fragments, and awkward structures that may appear to suggest slippage in writing ability rather than as a necessary part of the developmental process of syntactic complexity.

Learning new grammatical structures is a gradual process. Because acquiring control of a new structure requires multiple attempts at using it, writers need these intermediate stages between no control and full control to learn the tricks of the trade. Writing fluency develops most easily when teachers make a conscious effort to protect these stages for their students' experimentation with writing by creating risk-free writing environments, by encouraging revision, and by not grading drafts.

**Rhetorical Errors.** The second category of "error" is the inappropriateness of the structure or diction for the purposes of the writer or the audience—using the

rhetoical context of the writing for decisions about voice, tone, and usage within the writing. From an early age, children and young adults are aware of the social context of oral language and modify their use of language to fit the particular social situation. Even five-year-olds know that direct demands are inappropriate in some social contexts, and they soon learn that polite forms of request are going to be more effective than direct demands in getting what they want. "May I have that?" gets them more than "Gimme that" does. But the nature of audience and appropriateness in writing is a difficult concept because often the audience is either a distant one, unlike oral conversation, or the real audience is actually the teacher, the real reader of the writing, despite attempts to "imagine" an audience beyond the classroom. Imagined artificial audiences sometimes make it difficult for writers to use the expected, appropriate diction because they write with the teacher or their peers in mind, especially if the writing is not to find its way beyond the classroom walls. Using slang in a paper may be acceptable to the writer's peers but not to the teacher. At other times writers imagine that all their writing must be formal structures and diction, resulting in awkward, stilted sentence structures, inelegant and sometimes inappropriate for intended audiences. The student who writes "If the college of your choice is a highly-reputated one . . ." is attempting to approximate the academic discourse community he wishes to become part of. These scenarios reflect more the inexperience of young writers than their violation of a set of "rules." Sometimes these reflect misguided notions of appropriateness, sometimes the lack of awareness that different registers exist for different purposes and audiences, and sometimes the assumption that all writing should be written for the teacher. Writing for real, varied audiences beyond classroom walls provides opportunities for writers to explore varying structures and forms, writing in different registers, writing for specific purposes.

***Dialect Features or Usage Errors.*** The third issue related to error deals with usage or dialect features in student writing. All speakers of English speak a dialect of English, and the features of any given dialect systematically follow the rules and conventions of that dialect. Any usage that conforms to the speaker's internalized system of language and abides by the rules of that system is grammatical from a linguistic perspective. Double negation, as in "I don't want none," is grammatical for speakers of some speech communities. No rule has been violated within the constraints of this dialect; rather the double negative conforms to the internalized structure of that linguistic system. As speakers of English, we do not consider Spanish speakers for whom adjectives follow nouns—"casa grande" (big house), for example—to be violating a linguistic rule when placing the adjective after the noun. We recognize Spanish as a different linguistic system. The same is also true of different dialects. All dialects are fully-formed linguistic systems with some patterns unique to those systems.

Why is it, then, that some English speakers make negative judgments about dialect speakers when they don't make those same judgments about speakers of other languages? Negative judgments about dialects within the same language system (Appalachian English versus New England English, for example) are usually

social judgments reflecting social class attitudes and assumptions. Linguistic differences become the basis of social judgments, not for linguistic reasons but for social reasons—a way of laying claim to greater power and authority, a way of maintaining social distance and superiority. Valuing certain linguistic forms over others (“I saw” rather than “I seen”; “I don’t have any” rather than “I don’t have none,” etc.) reflects the social attitudes of some middle-class speakers towards the speech patterns of working-class speakers—a “we-them” phenomenon fostered by the simplistic dichotomy of “good” and “bad” language, “correct” and “incorrect” language. As we stated earlier, these features become social markers and the basis for classifying speakers in terms of social position and power.

Linguistic judgments rooted in social class differences have an even more negative impact when these social markers appear in student writing, for one reason because most teachers and many laypeople are more willing to accept dialect differences in speech while resisting acceptance in writing. Often home discourses, or primary discourses, as James Gee refers to them, differ from the academic discourse patterns in print, and when the primary discourse includes features considered to be non-standard, they are often targeted for elimination in writing. The “sacredness” of writing and its potential permanence encourage the attitude that these social markers in writing are errors to be eliminated at all cost. The issue is a difficult one. While teachers knowledgeable about the linguistic validity of all dialects recognize these features as grammatical within the writer’s linguistic system, they also know that the social judgments are very real, that most readers will impose a set of traditional linguistic standards on what they read, regardless of the validity of the speaker’s dialect. For all practical purposes, then, they view these social markers as features that need to be eliminated because they are judged by the reading public as errors.

It is important to point out that the social markers in writing, although they reflect social markers in oral language, are nevertheless more limited: all writers modify their written usage in favor of more expected forms. Speakers who use double negation, “ain’t” as a verb form, or the habitual “be” in AAVE (African American Vernacular English) rarely use these forms in formal writing. Many speakers are code-switchers, able to use one set of linguistic rules for oral use within the community and for informal writing, another set of linguistic rules when the situation or context is perceived to be more formal, with expectations of standard usage. Not all social markers or non-standard dialect features will disappear from the writing, but many of the more stigmatized forms will. Writers whose oral dialects are largely AAVE or Appalachian, for example, will likely avoid the use of “ain’t” or “he be going. . . .” in formal writing or revised drafts but will occasionally delete past tense inflections on “worked” or use a non-traditional verb form like “had went.” What this suggests is the linguistic flexibility of speakers/writers and their awareness at some level of different expectations for informal and formal language.

**Writing Conventions: Mechanics and Punctuation.** Errors in this category exist by virtue of the struggles inexperienced writers have with the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. We must understand that they are mat-

ters of conventions, common practice, and current usage, suggesting change over time and even from one speech community to another. For example, British English's spelling of "colour" and "metre" and its use of periods and commas outside rather than inside the quotation mark suggest different cultural practices that establish the conventions of that particular system. Even within a given culture variations exist. The use of the comma before the last item in a series is now optional ("apples, pears, and oranges"), as is the use of a comma after a short introductory clause in a sentence ("Despite her efforts the work was delayed."). Though conventions of several decades ago made these uses of punctuation obligatory, they are examples of the rules that change over time.

Despite the usual practice in writing instruction of grouping these items of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling together in the category of writing conventions, Cordeiro cites major differences between capitalization and spelling, on one hand, and punctuation on the other. She cites spelling, handwriting, and capitalization as skills of a closed nature, that can be "routinized and made subliminal . . . learnable in a single, final form" (59–60). Punctuation, by contrast, cannot be made routinized because it is always "open to negotiation" (60) and often subject to the peculiarities of the structure in question. Punctuation, in other words, is an open capacity that is not mastered from a list of rules so much as from continued attention and practice with a variety of sentence structures that are fluid, ever-changing, and contextualized. The ability to use punctuation appropriately increases with reading and writing opportunities and is a developmental process that occurs over time and with experience. Much of this knowledge accumulates slowly, as writers/readers pay attention to the conventions in their writing/reading, but it often takes a more conscious awareness of written form for this learning to take hold.

### *The Pendulum Swings*

As described in Chapter Three, the traditional approach to composition instruction focused heavily on grammar and correctness, based almost exclusively on Standard English. This monolithic approach ignored the true complexity of English usage, both oral and written, privileging Standard English over all other discourses in the belief that skill in this area would lead to better grades, better jobs, and ultimately a better life in the world of mainstream English speakers and writers. Grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation rules were seen as fixed, and accepted as the only proper way to write regardless of context, reader, or purpose of the discourse. Equipped with classroom sets of grammar and usage workbooks, teachers taught grammar and mechanics in isolated units or even for entire semesters, convinced that these skills would carry over to student writing when they eventually were asked to compose instead of fill in the blanks on worksheets. Often, students were taught and re-taught the same grammatical terms and usage skills yearly. When responding to student writing, teachers focused on errors—deviations from the Standard Edited American English of the grammar text—as

if the main reason for writing were to produce mechanically perfect prose. Meanwhile, teachers continued to be frustrated by errors when these skill lessons did not transfer to the actual writing of a paper even though students might do well on grammar and usage tests.

With growing awareness of linguistic diversity and the recognition that all dialects are functioning linguistic systems for their users, educators began to reconsider the traditional approach to grammar and correctness described above. Eradicating students' home dialects in the service of Standard English came under heavy fire. The publication in 1974 of NCTE's *Students' Right to Their Own Language* marked a significant shift in our concept of correctness and what constitutes error. Linguists and educators began to talk about the need to teach students to be flexible language users, able to shift from one dialect or linguistic system to another based on the context of the written or oral discourse. Teaching students to write in Standard English included teaching them to recognize when it was necessary—for example in formal essays or business letters—and when it was not, such as in personal correspondence or early drafts of formal papers. "Correctness" in writing increasingly became a more fluid term, based on appropriateness, leading teachers to question the need for such heavy emphasis on grammar, mechanics, and Standard English usage in their writing program.

Another influence on this shift in dealing with correctness was the growth of the writing process movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Many teachers, newly proselytized to this approach, threw aside all attention to the more mundane mechanical aspects of writing, focusing instead on developing their students' writing fluency, self-expression, creativity, and self-esteem. Armed with good will and a genuine desire to nurture the writer within, teachers sometimes swung the pendulum too far, neglecting all mention of error in favor of uniformly positive support, fearful that attention to grammar and correctness would dampen their students' newly awakened enthusiasm for writing. Armed with knowledge of the multiple studies showing little if any correlation between teaching grammar and improvements in student writing, many teachers opted to ignore it completely.

Partly this was due to an imperfect understanding of how writing conventions and grammatical issues could be taught as part of the writing process. But another contributing factor was the enormous increase in the paper load that enthusiastic writing teachers inevitably found themselves faced with as students began to delight in putting their ideas down on paper. Committed to reading everything just as they had when students were producing far less writing in more traditional classrooms ("They won't write unless I read it all," was a common complaint), teachers focused on content, with little or no attention paid to the sometimes egregious errors that filled their students' papers. In many classrooms Standard English grammar, correctness, mechanics, and usage as the primary goal of writing instruction went to the bottom of the hierarchy of concerns in favor of fluency and self-expression.

An article in *English Journal* by four English educators (Baines et al. 1999), based on observations during six years of more than 300 secondary writing teachers, documents this imbalance. The teachers they observed taught writing using

some form of "the process," categorized by the researchers into "classic," "anti-grammarian," and "five-paragraph" approaches. Despite their differences in ways of using "process" methodology, the teachers in this study devoted little if any time to the direct teaching of skills, relying instead on peer response groups to deal with matters of correctness. Creating stress-free writing environments and giving As and Bs to those who did the work, all neglected "error" when evaluating student writing. The researchers concluded that these teachers "seemed more dedicated to 'the process' than to improving the quality of student writing (72)." The "product" of writing—a finished, polished, high quality piece—was neglected in favor of the writing process.

The pendulum is now swinging back to a more medial position on issues of teaching grammar, correctness, and the conventions of Standard English. Nancie Atwell's second edition of her much-acclaimed *In the Middle* (1998) includes much more attention to teaching the conventions of written English than her 1987 edition. Atwell notes her own frustration in earlier years when she found that ten-minute mini-lessons often lasted much longer, adding to her growing realization that developing writers needed more attention to skills. Connie Weaver's text, *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996), also advocates teaching the elements of grammar that have a direct impact on writing plus the punctuation and mechanics necessary for successful editing. Lisa Delpit, Maria de la Luz Reyes, and other educators of non-mainstream students, decry the process movement's emphasis on fluency, recommending, even demanding, that users of non-mainstream dialects be taught the skills necessary for success in our society, where Standard English is the language of power.

#### **Think/Write #1**

How did your own secondary English teachers handle grammar and correctness? Do you remember grammar units, worksheets, heavy marking of papers for errors, or did your teachers use other approaches? Were the strategies your teachers used effective for you? Were they effective for other students in your secondary English classes? What do you think was the biggest influence on your present ability to produce mechanically and grammatically correct writing when necessary?

### ***What Aspects of Grammar, Mechanics, and Usage Should We Teach?***

Our position is that grammar and correctness must be an integral component of a rich, varied, well-structured writing program. Students benefit from some knowledge of Grammar II (grammatical structures) and Grammar III (appropriate usage), along with the conventions of written English. We do not advocate isolated six-week grammar units based on lectures and workbooks nor a return to sentence diagramming nor heavy "red-penciling" of student writing. As shown earlier in this chapter, research over the last century presents compelling evidence

proofreading and error correction, and assuming responsibility for their own self-editing competence.

### ***Mark Student Papers Wisely: Abandon the Error Hunt***

Another cluster of correctness strategies centers on marking techniques for the teacher, ones which differ significantly from the traditional "red-pencilitis" approach and are always preceded by classroom use of editing workshops and self-editing strategies. Copious marking of each and every individual error is labor-intensive for the teacher and intimidating for the student. In addition, no research study has ever been able to show the effectiveness of this approach. Instead, we recommend the following strategies.

***Benign Neglect.*** Students involved for the first time in the process approach to writing, those newly engaged in journal-writing, pre-writing exercises, multiple drafts, revision, and proofreading, can benefit from a period of teacher inattention to correctness when marking final drafts of papers. Especially if students' previous writing instruction focused heavily on form and correctness, they need time to re-center their attention on what they have to say as writers and to learn the various composing strategies that will make writing more pleasurable for both the writer and the reader. If students are generating a great deal of writing and are frequently engaged in editing workshop strategies, the teacher can safely focus written comments on content for a short time. This benign neglect gives students a chance to internalize writing and proofreading skills and to demonstrate what they *do* know before the teacher begins to identify and work on areas of weakness.

***Selectivity.*** Students are more likely to grow as writers when the teacher's primary purpose in reading student papers is to respond to content. However, if attention to content and correctness are combined when marking papers, it is more helpful to select one or two *kinds* of errors the individual student is making than to point out every error in the paper. The teacher can identify a selected error, point out and correct an example or two on the student's paper, and either explain the correct form or direct the student to a handbook for further explanation. The student might also be asked to identify and correct this particular problem in the rest of the paper and turn it in again for the teacher to review.

***Error-Analysis.*** A marking method that can be especially fruitful for the teacher is to approach it from an analytic perspective. As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, all errors are not equal and shouldn't be addressed in the same way. The composition teacher as error-analyst looks for patterns in the errors of an individual student, tries to discover how the student arrived at the mistake by analyzing the error, and plans strategies accordingly. For example, is the error due to a lack of knowledge about a certain grammatical point? A mis-learned rule? A careless error? Use of a non-mainstream dialect? Overgeneralization of a particular rule?

Kroll and Schafer, Bartholomae, and Shaughnessy have demonstrated the efficacy of error-analysis in helping teachers better understand the source of student error as an aid to planning more effective ways of dealing with it.

When we examine the following piece of first draft student writing, we can be overwhelmed by the total number of surface errors.

#### *The Accident*

It started win I was coming home for school. I was in a happe move. It was so wram and I said to myself noting better than home sweet home. and I eat my dinner and did my home work. and dad came in and he aet dinner and read the newspaper. and It was drak and It was time to pick up mom. Bout on hour way we was waiting at the red light. Then dad was about to trun and. I was looking the other way. and I looked qukely and we crashed. and I boaingd my haed on the dashbo-rad. and the ambulance arrived and I was calling mom mom and dad said she will be here.

The temptation when faced with a piece like this is to overlook the writer's lively voice and grab a red pen. But if we did so, the paper would bleed, and is likely to end up a wadded ball in the wastebasket. Error-analysis provides a better way to respond. Close examination shows only four different kinds of errors: spelling, sentence boundary problems that are often marked by the use of "and" to start a new idea, missing quotation marks for the final dialogue, and one instance of non-standard dialect—"we was." Selecting one or two of these kinds of errors to discuss at a conference or to comment on at the bottom of the paper is likely to achieve more than circling errors. For example, the student could work on sentences by reading the paper aloud, removing almost all the "ands," and adding capital letters and periods where necessary. He and the teacher or a peer could do this together. Then the student could check all the words he suspects are misspelled and correct them. Focusing on these two kinds of errors would be enough for this paper. If the piece is going to eventually end up in a class publication, a later draft might attend to quotation marks and the shift to Standard English—"we were."

Error analysis of this sort combined with a selective approach when responding to student writing helps both teacher and student understand the student's writing problems and work toward correcting them.

#### *Publish Student Writing for Motivation and Reward*

Writers, professionals as well as students, need a reason for laboring over a draft until it is perfect. The urge to see oneself in print can be a powerful drive toward revision and proofreading. Watch what happens when a class publication is handed out. Each writer is likely to flip immediately to his or her own work for a minute of personal pleasure before browsing through the rest of the book. Writing teachers need to take advantage of this human need to be heard, to leave a physical imprint on the world, by offering numerous opportunities for sharing and publishing. See Chapter Three for numerous ideas on ways to publish student writing.

## *Computers and Correctness*

As the use of computers for writing has grown, so has the proliferation of studies examining the effects of computers on writers' processes and final products. Research results are mixed: while most researchers agree that students develop more positive attitudes toward writing and do more revision with computers, the effect on the quality of the papers themselves is contradictory. Numerous studies show computers have no effect on the overall quality of the papers; however, most of these studies were limited to a ten- or twelve-week period of study, perhaps too brief for computer use to impact writing improvement, especially since learning to use the computer often takes up instructional time at first. A 1992 study of eighth graders who were already experienced computer users had more promising results. The researchers found that "papers written on computer were rated significantly higher" than handwritten papers in all the qualities assessed, including mechanics (Owston, Murphy, Wideman). Concerned about the influence of spelling on the higher ratings assigned word-processed texts, the researchers assessed a random sample of papers from both categories, finding no difference in mean spelling errors between the computer-written papers and the handwritten ones, indicating that spelling did not bias the ratings. This study offers evidence that computers might provide yet another strategy for improving students' mechanical/grammatical skills.

At the present time, it makes sense to involve students in writing on computers as much as possible for ease of revision and the use of such writing aids as a spelling checker, thesaurus, or grammar checker. These computer tools can provide some help with final copyediting, but they can also lull students into superficial stylistic checks. The kinds of syntactic problems raised earlier in this chapter don't lend themselves to mechanical checking systems, and many of the "errors" flagged by the machine are matters for stylistic decisions, such as use of the passive voice. Teachers must remind students that the beautifully typed paper emerging from the printer still needs the same attention to mechanics, grammar, and usage that any piece of writing requires before it is ready for evaluation or publication.

## *Correctness in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom*

Advocates for writing process instruction have been criticized for neglecting form and correctness in favor of fluency by those who don't fully understand the ways in which writing process instruction includes attention to all aspects of writing development. But criticism has also come from teachers of minority students. Delpit (1986, 1988) and Reyes (1992) have been critical of writing process instruction for speakers of non-mainstream dialects, arguing that this method does not give these students explicit instruction in the standard literacy skills they need for

access to higher education and the workplace. At first this position seems in direct conflict with the methods advocated throughout this book, and the danger is in misunderstanding their position as calling for a return to isolated instruction in grammar and mechanics. Yet both educators agree that skills must be taught within a context that encourages full development of linguistic skills and "critical and creative thinking" (Delpit 1986).

It is our contention that writing process instruction in the hands of a skilled teacher who fully understands ways to integrate skills instruction into a writing and reading workshop environment would include whatever direct instruction was necessary for students to develop standard literacy skills. Many of the activities described earlier in this chapter give non-mainstream students the instruction necessary for developing Standard English skills, yet also provide a climate supportive of students' individual growth as thinkers and writers: mini-lessons in skills followed by direct application to students' own writing, extended mini-lessons that also include some practice exercises in the skill being taught, individual conferences with the teacher to work at the specific skills each student needs, and an emphasis on preparing writing for publication.

According to Hagemann (2001), users of non-mainstream English need the following in order to develop Standard English literacy skills:

1. Exposure to a great deal of Standard American English in written and spoken form.
2. Aroused awareness of the differences and similarities between their home dialect and the Standard English of school and the wider world.
3. An understanding of the need to shift from one mode of discourse to another depending on the situation, and the motivation and ability to do so.

A classroom rich with a wide variety of linguistic resources—books, magazines, videos, CDs, computers—and a curriculum in which students are immersed in both reading and writing go a long way toward meeting the first of these needs. The second is more complex. Hagemann points out that speakers of non-mainstream dialects may have particular difficulties learning to write in Standard English because their own form of English functions very well to communicate with friends and family, in general business situations such as shopping or travel, and in the normal situations of everyday life. They may not notice the specific differences between their own dialect and that of Standard English users and they may not be motivated to make any changes in their own discourse forms. In fact, she goes so far as to say "... it may be easier for non-natives to learn Standard English than it is for natives" (76). To overcome this, students need not only exposure to Standard English but what Hagemann describes as "a pedagogy of overt comparison" (77) in which students are led to compare specific features of their own language with more standard forms. Students must learn to *see* the deviations between their home dialect and Standard English before they can make these changes in their writing. An additional factor here is that formal Standard English forms may feel stiff, stilted, pretentious, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar. For example, a student

whose home dialect leads him to write, "I seen that she had went shopping," is likely to find the Standard English form, "I saw that she had gone shopping," both awkward and affected.

Effective methods for helping students move toward Standard English usage in their writing must include both attention to language features and to the concept of appropriateness. Hagemann and Wininger (1999) describe such an approach by a teacher who uses mini-lessons explicitly contrasting "friend talk" and "school talk" based on the work of Mary Berger (1996). Selecting a feature that differs in the students' dialect and Standard English (for example, omission of the verb "to be" in "He my friend" and its presence in the Standard English version, "He is my friend"), the teacher puts both versions of the sentence on the board and explains the rule in each kind of talk. Working with this kind of contrastive analysis, the teacher might have students translate a sentence from "school talk" to "friend talk" or vice versa, or might have students identify which dialect a sentence is written in. A teacher can also ask students to identify the "friend talk" in their own early drafts or informal writing and turn these phrases into "school talk" for a formal final draft. This approach values the language a student brings to the classroom rather than trying to eradicate it, while also teaching elements of Standard English in a manner that recognizes each is appropriate under certain circumstances.

A final factor, the motivation to learn these new forms and make these shifts to Standard English, must come from within the student. Overt discussions of when it is appropriate to use formal versus informal language in writing plus multiple opportunities to shift back and forth between them to perform various writing tasks can help students make this shift. Journals, notes, and rough drafts in the home dialect can be intermingled with formal essays, letters to public figures, editorials, and all manner of published writing projects for anthologies or web pages.

Speakers of non-mainstream dialects and ESL (English as a second language) students may indeed need more instruction in Standard English than students familiar with middle-class academic discourse, but skills instruction for all students is best taught within the context of the writing process and in a classroom that stresses writing as a meaning-making and communicative activity.

#### **Think/Write #4**

Part I. Figure 4.6 is a middle-school student's first draft. The assignment was to write about a time when you had fun. Analyze this piece of writing, considering the following questions. What are this student's strengths as a writer? What does he do well? What are the student's weaknesses as a writer? What non-standard dialect features do you see in this piece of writing? What patterns do you find in the kinds of surface errors he makes?

Part II. Plan strategies for working with this student and this piece of writing. How will you respond to it? What feedback will you give the student? What suggestions will you make for revision and proofreading? What do you predict might happen if you asked him to correct his own work in preparation for a class publication? What elements of grammar and usage do you think he needs to learn?

**FIGURE 4.6** *Example of Middle School Writing****The Day I Took Off***

On day on Firday everything looking Beautiful  
Kids running up and down my street. My  
Friend Andy ran past and I call him I said  
lets go do something lets have some fun so my  
Friend and I went to the park and it was  
Fill with people Black White young, old  
people. We walked through the parked and we  
play a little Basket Ball we won a couple  
of games. I wanted something to drink my  
Throat was dry Andy ask me did I want  
to go to the store I said yes. So we walked  
to 7-11 and Bough some of them little juices.  
I Bough three apple juice. Andy got three grape.  
the juices cost \$1.50 for three. we had  
five dollar each now we got three dollar and  
fifty cent each. We decide to try the Bus  
to the mall so we could watch all those pretty  
ladys and young lady come out of the stores.  
we went to this one Big Mall  
it has everything in it. store next to store  
then I get tირ walking whose all those store so  
I told Andy let's go home I just took off and  
no one Knew we will caught the next Bus home  
OK yes.

***Sentence Variety***

A century of research has failed to show any positive correlation between teaching formal grammar of any kind and writing improvement. Research into sentence combining, however, has demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of exercise in improving the variety and complexity of students' sentences. This does not mean that students who do sentence combining exercises become overall better writers. Content is still more important than the structure of individual sentences. But sentence combining is one way of helping students increase their linguistic fluency and develop a more mature writing style. Sentence combining, sentence expanding, sentence composing, and manipulation of sentence parts to achieve variety, are all useful exercises with more beneficial influence on student writing than traditional grammar study. These exercises work because they are productive uses of language in which students directly manipulate language elements, drawing on their own unconscious linguistic knowledge to produce new sentence constructions.

### **Sentence Combining**

Sentence combining exercises ask students to combine several "kernel" sentences that have only one idea into one longer, more complex sentence. For example, *The girl was late to class* and *She didn't do her homework* could be combined to read *The girl who was late to class didn't do her homework*. Students can be given cues to help them put the sentences together, thus encouraging constructions they might not ordinarily use, or the exercise can be an open one, where students create their own constructions.

**Cued Sentence Combining.** A cued sentence combining exercise on the two sentences above would look like this:

1. The girl was late to class.
2. She didn't do her homework.  
(use "who")

This could produce two different constructions, depending on what the writer wants to highlight:

The girl who didn't do her homework was late for class.  
The girl who was late for class didn't do her homework.

Here are other examples of cued sentence combining:

1. They moved to Detroit.
2. In Detroit he became a carpenter.  
(use "where")

Response: They moved to Detroit, where he became a carpenter.

1. They moved to Detroit.
2. In Detroit he became a carpenter.  
(use "when")

Response: When they moved to Detroit, he became a carpenter.

**Open Sentence Combining.** Open sentence combining exercises leave students free to draw completely on their own linguistic resources and often produce a wide variety of constructions from a class of students combining the same kernel sentences. The advantage of this kind of activity is the opportunity to evaluate the responses in terms of the effects they achieve. This also leads students to understand that there is no single "right" way to combine sentences, that much depends on the effect the writer wants to achieve or the idea to be highlighted. See what kinds of constructions you can create when you combine the following eight

kernel sentences into one sentence. Compare your results with those of others doing the same exercise.

1. There was a storm.
2. The storm was severe.
3. It had lightning.
4. It had thunder.
5. It had high winds.
6. The storm left streets littered with broken tree limbs.
7. The storm caused electrical blackouts.
8. The storm caused serious injuries to many people.

Possible responses:

- A severe storm with lightning, thunder, and high winds left streets littered with broken tree limbs, caused electrical blackouts, and seriously injured many people.
- The lightning, thunder, and high winds of a severe storm caused electrical blackouts and serious injuries to many people, leaving the streets littered with broken tree limbs.

See how many different ways you can combine the sentences below. Compare your responses with others. Discuss the differences among various constructions and consider which combinations are most effective. Evaluate the different effects achieved with various sentence combinations.

1. The party was over.
2. The guests were happy.
3. The guests were tired.
4. The guests spilled out of the house.
5. The guests were laughing.
6. They were talking.
7. The guests got into cars.
8. The cars were theirs.
9. Their cars lined the streets.
10. The streets were quiet.
11. Their cars sped away.
12. Their cars were noisy.

Possible responses:

When the party was over, the happy but tired guests spilled out of the house into the quiet streets, still laughing and talking, got into their cars and sped noisily away.

The streets were quiet when the happy but tired party guests spilled out of the house, laughing and talking, got into their cars and sped noisily away.

**Sentence De-combining.** It can also be useful to turn complex sentences into a list of the kernel sentences forming the original. This gives students a chance to see the kinds of sentence constructions the author used to transform the list of ideas unpacked in the kernel sentences into the original complex sentence. Here's a short sentence from Annie Dillard's essay "The Fixed" in its original form and then de-combined into a series of kernel sentences:

"I was standing in the driveway, alone, stock-still, but shivering."

1. I was standing.
2. I was in the driveway.
3. I was alone.
4. I was stock-still.
5. I was shivering.

After students have a chance to review the two versions, they can evaluate the stylistic effect Dillard achieved in the way she combines these kernel ideas. For instance, why didn't she say "I was standing alone in the driveway"? What effect did she achieve in choosing to isolate the word "alone" and use it as the first in a list of adverbs describing her physical state?

Here's a longer sentence from Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook," first as it appears in the essay and then as a series of kernel sentences:

"My first notebook was a Big Five tablet, given to me by my mother with the sensible suggestion that I stop whining and learn to amuse myself by writing down my thoughts."

1. My notebook was a Big Five tablet.
2. It was my first notebook.
3. My mother gave it to me.
4. She suggested that I stop whining.
5. Her suggestion was sensible.
6. She suggested that I learn to amuse myself.
7. She suggested that I write down my thoughts.

Classroom discussions can focus on Didion's use of "given to me by my mother" and "with the sensible suggestion" instead of *My mother gave it to me* and *She suggested I stop whining*.

### **Sentence Expanding**

Another way to engage students in working with sentence construction is to have them expand a brief kernel sentence by adding descriptive phrases and clauses. For example, a kernel sentence such as *The cat slept* can lead to *Stretched out on its back, paws dangling in the air, belly exposed to any passerby, the cat slept peacefully on the couch, as safe and secure as an infant dozing on its mother's lap*. The value of this kind of activity is the possibilities it demonstrates for making writing

richer, describing more, "showing" more, adding the details that make a piece come alive for the reader. But it also encourages the use of a wide variety of clauses and phrases to create syntactically interesting sentences. No response can be wrong unless it creates an incorrect sentence construction such as a run-on sentence. Expand the kernel sentences below and compare your responses to those of others.

The wastebasket sat in the corner.  
John made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.  
Susan procrastinated.  
Several students complained.  
The rock singer approached the stage.  
He bought a new pair of jeans.

### *Sentence Composing and Imitation*

Students can be given sentences from professional writers and asked to compose similar sentences, modeled after the examples. Here are two examples of sentences by professional writers and students' imitations.

The writer, an old man with a white mustache, had some difficulty getting into bed.  
—Sherwood Anderson

The student, a young girl with rings in both eyebrows and nostrils, had no difficulty getting the attention she demanded.  
—A student writer

There were black Saturdays now and then when Maria and Miranda sat ready, hats in hand, curly hair plastered down and slicked behind their ears, their stiffly-pleated navy-blue skirts spread out around them, waiting with their hearts going down slowly into their high-topped laced-up black books.  
—Katherine Anne Porter

There were black Sunday nights now and then when I sat at my computer, textbooks piled up, coffee cup filled from a freshly brewed pot and balanced precariously close to the keyboard, my shabby sweats enveloping me in comforting warmth, waiting with anxiety for inspiration to suddenly emerge from the dregs of the weekend.  
—A student writer

The value of this exercise lies in getting students to use constructions they would not ordinarily consider, either because they are not part of their conscious language use or because they've been unaware of these constructions. At first these constructions may only appear in the assigned exercises, but they will eventually make their way into students' writing, especially if the teacher encourages students to use them and then shares good student examples with the whole class.

In our experience, developing writers are insecure about using new constructions, but with enough practice and praise, they soon develop much more linguistic fluency and are quick to point out interesting sentence constructions in both student and professional writing.

### ***Sentence Manipulation***

Exercises in which students rearrange sentence parts to achieve a variety of effects and use varied construction can also be useful in helping students become more flexible and syntactically mature writers. Students can practice this in their own writing or rearrange the sentence elements of professional writers. Here is a student's sentence rearranged in three different ways. Students can continue to rearrange the elements of this sentence and evaluate the effect each arrangement has on meaning.

I found the hard lenses to be more durable, more comfortable, and less likely to dry out easily although they will crack if too much pressure is applied during the cleaning process.

The hard lenses will crack if too much pressure is applied during the cleaning process, but they are more durable, more comfortable, and less likely to dry out easily.

Durable, comfortable, and less likely to dry out easily, hard lenses will crack if too much pressure is applied during the cleaning process.

Try rearranging the sentence parts in the following sentence by Annie Dillard describing a polyphemous moth emerging from its cocoon in a jar too small to permit full extension of its wings: "Those huge wings stuck on his back in a torture of random pleats and folds, wrinkled as a dirty tissue, rigid as leather." Consider the differences in emphasis and meaning that each change creates.

### ***Recommended Resources for Sentence Combining Exercises***

For discussions and examples of exercises to promote sentence variety and syntactic growth at the secondary level, we like several texts by William Strong: *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book*, 3rd edition, *Sentence Combining and Paragraph Building*, and *Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining*. Don Killgallon's *Sentence Composing: The Complete Guide* also offers a thorough discussion of numerous sentence combining and composing activities, based on analyzing, manipulating, and imitating the sentences of professional writers. Teachers will find this a useful classroom resource. Separate sentence composing texts by Killgallon for grades 10 and 11 are also available. Although it is geared for college students, teachers and advanced high school students could expand their understanding of sentence combining with *The Writer's Options: Combining to Composing*, fifth edition, by Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, Max Morenberg, and Jeffrey Sommers.

### *Wordiness and Other Aspects of Style*

One of the hallmarks of a more mature writing style is concise use of language. Redundant, wordy, repetitive sentences detract from the clarity of a writer's ideas and reduce the impact of his thinking. Simple activities such as the ones below will make developing writers more aware of the excess and inexact verbiage they often use to express an idea and help them "tighten" their language. Attention to this aspect of writing is best reserved for later in the school year or for advanced writers who are no longer struggling with the more basic elements of the writing process and are ready to work on stylistic matters.

#### *Developing a More Mature Writing Style*

Directions: Select one of your past papers or a completed draft of a piece you are now working on. Search for and circle all examples of the structures below. Remove as many as you can, revising sentences, removing wordiness, tightening your language. Goal: delete 15 words per page without altering meaning.

1. Tighten wordy language and language so general it conveys little to the reader.  
Examples:

I noticed that . . .  
It may be argued that . . .  
Let me make it perfectly clear that . . .  
I remembered that . . .  
It was an amazing scene.  
This paper is about . . .  
I decided to write this paper about . . .  
As we approached her, I noticed that . . .

2. Remove "there is," "there are," "it is," "it was," and other wordy constructions.  
Examples:

There is only one other place in the house that has seen more of me.  
(Only one other place in the house has seen more of me.)  
There are people taking their daily walk or run. There are children that ride their bicycles to their friends' houses.  
(People take their daily walk or run. Children ride their bicycles to their friends' houses.)

3. Avoid "and," "but," and "so" as sentence connectors. Circle each of these words in your paper. Can you re-design these sentences by creating subordinate clauses?

Example:

He was my friend and he spent a lot of time at my house so we became even better friends and did a lot together.

4. Avoid the use of qualifiers—*rather, very, little, pretty, quite*. “These are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words” (Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* 65).

Example:

I was rather tired, so I decided to take a little nap.

5. Use strong verbs instead of forms of the verb *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were*).

Examples:

The Akron game was a disappointment to the fans.

(The Akron game disappointed the fans.)

6. Vary your sentences, use complex sentences, combine several ideas into one sentence by using modifying clauses and phrases. If you find several sentences in a row constructed exactly the same way with a repetitive opening that is not purposefully planned, work on varying constructions and combining ideas.

Example:

One woman is measuring picture frames. *She asks me* my opinion about the frame. *She is looking for* a frame to go with an oil painting she bought at a garage sale. *She also tells me* that her vacuum cleaner quit. *She shows me* the sweeper she plans on buying. *She only has* enough money today for the sweeper and maybe enough for a frame. *She also tells me* that her boyfriend recently bought furniture from the second hand store for his cabin up north.

When a class or group of students is ready for work on this aspect of writing, mini-lessons on each of the areas above can be a productive way to promote tighter, more precise, more stylistically mature writing at the sentence level.

#### **Think/Write #5**

Choose a paper of your own and do the tightening exercises demonstrated above. How many words can you remove without altering meaning or style?

### **Points to Remember**

“Grammar” is a term with multiple meanings and associations that range from the unconscious rules of the structure of the language to dialect/usage rules and writing conventions. Within this broad framework, the nature of error suggests that it is a necessary part of learning to write effectively, that children and young adults need opportunities to try out forms before they are in complete control of them. The nature of syntactic development suggests that children and young adults need lots of writing and experimentation with syntactic structures to gain fluency in writing. Differentiating types of errors ranging from developmental to

rhetorical, from dialect/usage to writing conventions will help teachers make decisions about when providing guided instruction in aspects of language and grammar will be useful and when that instruction will be more effective.

Grammar, usage, and mechanical correctness are best taught in context as part of the composing process rather than in isolated units of study. Attention to these skills should be saved for the editing/proofreading stages of producing a finished piece when students are preparing their writing for readers who expect Standard English. Students don't need to know much formal grammatical terminology since they already have a great deal of competence in language use; therefore, teachers should focus instruction on what students need to know to produce written Standard English. Many classroom activities promote attention to final editing/proofreading and encourage students to accept responsibility for their own correctness. Speakers and writers of Non-Standard English benefit from specific attention to recognizing the differences between their home dialect and Standard English plus an understanding of the need to shift from their home dialect to more standard forms when formal writing demands this. Research suggests that sentence combining, sentence composing, and sentence manipulation activities lead to more mature writing at the sentence level.

### For Further Reading

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